

Equitable Education for All

A Guide to Ensure Equity for Students
Experiencing Homelessness



ABOUT MAEC

MAEC is an education non-profit dedicated to increasing access to high-quality education for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners. MAEC works to promote excellence and equity in education to achieve social justice.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION EQUITY (CEE)

MAEC established CEE to address problems in public schools caused by segregation and inequities. As the Region I Equity Assistance Center, CEE works to improve and sustain the systemic capacity of public education to increase student outcomes regardless of race, gender, religion, and national origin. CEE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

AUTHORSHIP

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DISCLAIMER

MAEC is committed to sharing information regarding equity issues in education. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the Equity Assistance Centers Program. However, the contents of this guide do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Department of Education or federal government, generally.



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Introduction

Across the United States, state and local education agencies work to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all students, including students who are experiencing homelessness. This barrier to academic success is, unfortunately, not unique. To equitably serve all students, states and districts must first identify students experiencing homelessness and then apply the structures and practices that address and eliminate educational disparities in this student population.

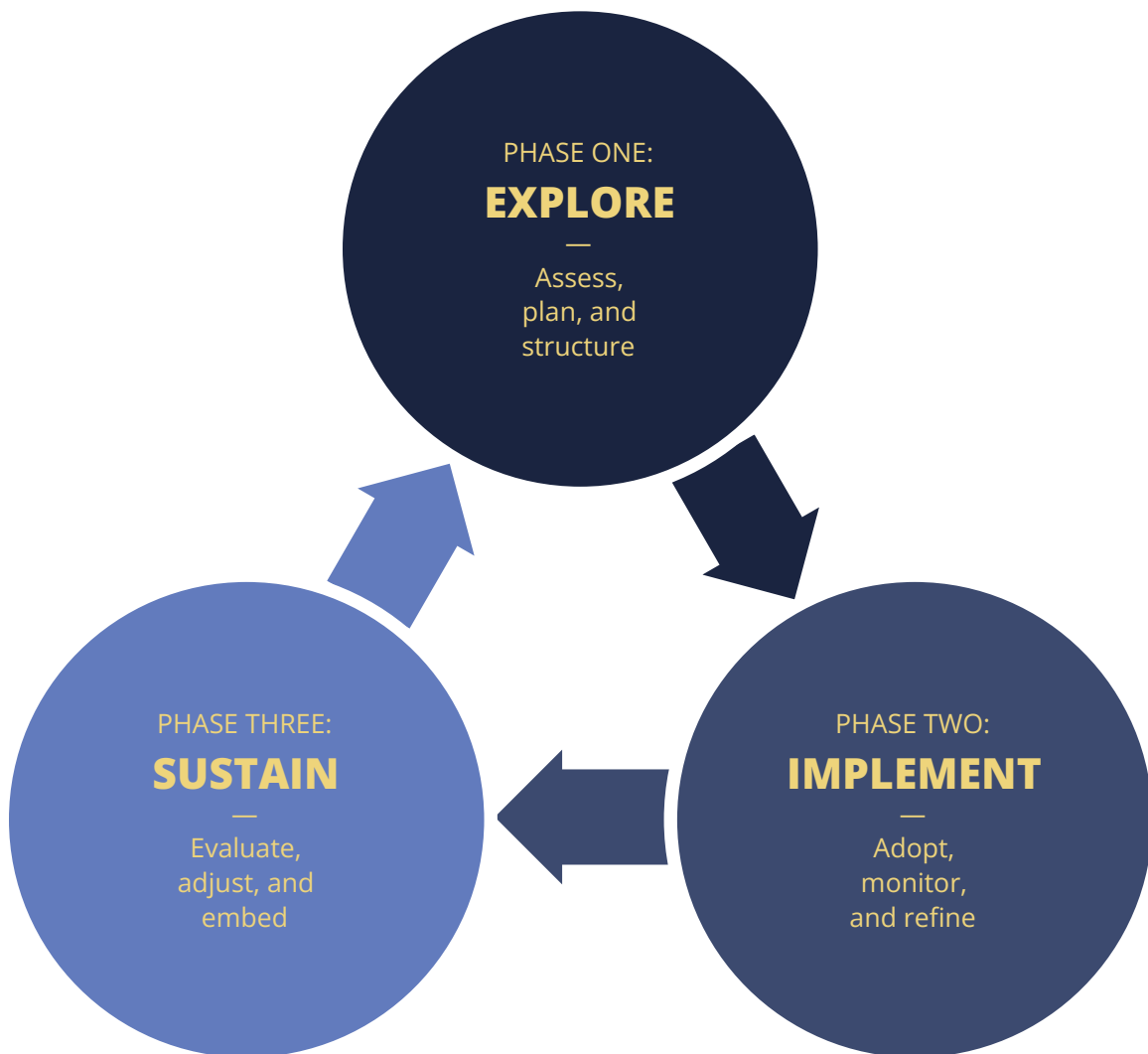
Students experiencing homelessness are disproportionately people of color and youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQIA+). They are also more likely to have been exposed to trauma. Childhood homelessness can have long-term negative physical, emotional, social, and educational impacts that can be challenging to overcome. Addressing the diverse needs of these students involves implementing targeted policy and practice changes to support social, emotional, and educational success. These changes must reflect an understanding of the intersecting challenges for our nation's most vulnerable students.

The Center for Education Equity seeks to support state coordinators and local liaisons for homeless education in developing, implementing, and sustaining plans for ensuring inclusive and supportive educational environments for students experiencing homelessness. This guide features a variety of quality resources to accompany the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento), and it identifies specific practices, procedures, and resources for ensuring effective homeless education programming.

This guide also provides state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) with a framework and process for embedding and sustaining best practices that address student homelessness and related challenges (see Figure 1). This guide helps develop a comprehensive plan through the following:

- SEAs and state coordinators for homeless education may use this guide as they develop or refine their state plans and processes for implementing McKinney-Vento provisions.
- State-level McKinney-Vento advisory committees may use the guide for planning and informing local liaison professional-development activities.
- Local liaisons for homeless education may use the implementation framework to start, support, and monitor local homeless education programs. The framework and tools may benefit new liaisons and those working to strengthen a culture of inclusion for McKinney-Vento students at the district and school levels.

Figure 1.
Framework for implementing an equitable approach



Part 1: Understanding the scope of student homelessness

Definition and prevalence of homelessness

Homelessness is a steadily growing problem in our nation's schools. During the 2016–17 school year, more than 1.3 million children and youth experiencing homelessness enrolled in public schools, which reflects a nearly 100 percent increase since 2007 (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

Passed in 1987, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was the first significant piece of legislation to address homelessness. The act was later amended to protect children's rights to public education when experiencing homelessness. Under McKinney-Vento, children and youth are considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including individuals who:

- are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals;
- have a primary nighttime residence in a public or private place not designed as, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- are migratory and live in one of the above circumstances (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The majority of students who are homeless and enrolled in school (76 percent) are “doubled up,” meaning that they are sharing housing with other individuals due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (NCHE, 2019). The second highest group of students in homeless situations (14 percent) live in shelters. There has been an increase

in homelessness among children with disabilities, students who are emerging multilingual learners, and unaccompanied youth who are not in the custody of a parent or legal guardian (NCHE, 2019). Students of color and LGBTQIA+ students are disproportionately represented among youth who are homeless (Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell, 2016).

It is important to remember that some students' experiences with homelessness (whether episodic or chronic) reflect the broader social conditions and trends around them. For example, any discrimination and marginalization related to race, gender identity, and sexual orientation among school-age youth may further exacerbate homelessness-related educational barriers. Housing crises and unemployment trends might be just two possible indications of student vulnerability.

Causes and consequences of student homelessness

The major causes of homelessness among families in the United States include social and economic conditions, such as persistently high poverty rates, increases in low-wage employment, and lack of affordable housing. Natural disasters and related displacement also cause homelessness, as do adverse or traumatic experiences in families, such as domestic violence and abuse (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2014; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2015; NCHE, 2017a).

Unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness might have been exposed to abuse and violence, family rejection due to issues such as sexual orientation or gender identity, or other interpersonal or economic circumstances that lead to family separation and housing instability.

We must also keep in mind that children and families experiencing homelessness demonstrate high rates of lifetime exposure to trauma in the form of childhood



abuse and neglect, domestic and community violence, unsafe living conditions, parental stress, challenges to mental wellness, substance abuse issues, and risk of separation from family members (Anooshian, 2005; Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk, 2004; Hayes, Zonneville, & Bassuk, 2013; Jasinski, Wesely, Mustaine, & Wright, 2005; Perlman, Cowan, Gewirtz, Haskett, & Stokes, 2012).

Significant disparities in risk for homelessness related to race and ethnicity have prompted research on structural racism as a significant cause of homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2014; Olivet & Dones, 2018). Key factors associated with these disparities in experiencing homelessness include access to affordable housing, lack of economic mobility, high rates of exposure to individual and community violence, and lack of tailored

services for people of color (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2014; Olivet & Dones, 2018).

Exposure to homelessness and related stressors can compromise healthy development and lead to a range of problems that impair a student's ability to cope with the requirements of a normal school day (Sulkowski & Michael, 2014). Related, students who experience homelessness are more likely to miss school, repeat a grade, score lower on achievement tests, be retained, and drop out of school altogether (Hong & Piescher, 2012; Losinski, Katsiyannis, & Ryan, 2013; Murphy, 2011). Youth who are homeless report that it is harder to stay in school and do well in school, and nearly half report that, at one or more points, they dropped out of school (Ingram et al., 2016).

Barriers to serving students who are homeless

The significant increase in children experiencing homelessness raises concerns about the education system's capacities to best support these students' needs.

A significant barrier to ensuring equitable access to services and supports involves identification. Challenges to identifying students who are homeless are related to a lack of awareness of the issue, reticence of youth and families to share their housing status due to stigma and fear of system involvement, and lack of understanding of legal rights and services available to them. Additional logistical barriers that can lead to increased absences or gaps in education include difficulty enrolling in school without records or proof of residency; navigating the process of switching schools multiple times based on changes in living situations; and lack of stable transportation and basic needs such as food, shelter, and supplies. Emotional barriers to full educational participation include stigma related to homelessness that makes youth and families hesitant to disclose their housing issues and the negative effects of homelessness and related stressors on student health and well-being (NCHE, 2017b; Ingram et al., 2016). Systemic barriers to serving youth experiencing homelessness include internal funding, time, staff, and resources; community awareness of homelessness; information sharing across agencies; and local support for this issue (Infram et al., 2016).

Addressing student homelessness: ESSA and McKinney-Vento

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, authorized under Subtitle VII-B of McKinney-Vento, is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Reauthorized in 2015 by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it ensures that policies and procedures are in place to remove barriers to educational access for a growing number of students who are homeless.

McKinney-Vento requires SEAs and LEAs to implement key legal provisions for students experiencing homelessness: consistent access to education in the

student's school of origin or immediate enrollment in a new school when appropriate; transportation to and from school and school-related activities; access to all programs and services for which the student is eligible; and the right for students and parents to participate in and dispute education-related decisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Coordinated support for students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services happens at multiple levels, which include the following:

- **State coordinators** monitor LEAs to ensure students experiencing homelessness are receiving full protection by the law. Roles include: coordinating with state and local policymakers to remove barriers for students; gathering and reporting data on homelessness amongst students; providing professional development programs for district liaisons and other school personnel to build awareness and capacity to serve students in homeless situations; listing contact information for local liaisons; posting data on student homelessness; and responding to inquiries from parents and youth (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], 2016a).
- **Local liaisons** are assigned for every LEA to support the implementation of McKinney-Vento protections. Liaisons ensure eligible students are identified and receive access to all entitled services. They also ensure equity by identifying students experiencing homelessness; informing youth and families about their rights; training school staff; referring students to educational and community-based services; making sure disputes are resolved; providing transportation; and addressing the needs of particular groups, such as unaccompanied youth (NAEHCY, 2016a).
- **School staff** who spend most of the day with students are well positioned to help recognize the warning signs of homelessness and connect McKinney-Vento students to needed support. Staff responses can positively or negatively impact the trajectory for a student who is homeless, based on extent of staff awareness of the issue and level of sensitivity toward students (Ausikaitis et al., 2015).

Part 2: Implementing an equitable approach for students experiencing homelessness

A variety of resources support the provisions of McKinney-Vento and specific practices and procedures for ensuring effective homeless education programming. In this guide, we align these resources within a larger framework for supporting and sustaining effective practices: explore, implement, and sustain. These phases provide a structure for application and continuous review and refinement of an equitable approach for students experiencing homelessness.

Each phase includes strategies that districts can use to guide the planning and implementation of McKinney-Vento provisions. States and districts may cycle through these phases continuously as they review and refine their approach.



Phase One: Explore

Assess, plan, and structure

SEAs and LEAs should continually explore what homelessness looks like in their schools and determine what systems and structures are needed to plan and support an equitable approach. Examining the extent of the problem and the quality of response includes a formal review of: the prevalence of student homelessness, including examining trends among particular subgroups; unique considerations related to disparities in identifying and servicing this population and subpopulations; barriers and challenges to serving students who experience homelessness; extent of awareness and understanding of McKinney-Vento across schools and districts; degree of compliance with McKinney-Vento provisions; and quality of partnerships, communication, and degree of alignment internally and externally. Coordinators and liaisons determine any adjustments needed to their structures and processes based on information from the McKinney-Vento program review.

KEY PRACTICES

The following actions are taken during the exploration phase, as SEAs and LEAs reflect, plan, and ensure the needed infrastructure to support students experiencing homelessness.

- ☐ **Determine the data related to student homelessness and current McKinney-Vento program implementation that will be most useful to collect.** Consider using existing data sets related to student homelessness and any informal or formal assessment tools to gather additional information about current program implementation. While conducting a comprehensive review of current program implementation, consider discussing the reflection questions in this section with staff. Such discussion may help gather information and ideas about other types of data needed.
- ☐ **Collect and review data.** Consider how to collect data, who will collect it, and who will be involved in the review. Ensure representation at all levels (school, district, state) and across key stakeholders. Strategies may include reviewing existing data collected as part of the McKinney-Vento program. SEAs and LEAs may organize data collection and review by broad categories, similar to the categories of reflection questions in this section, or by key provisions of McKinney-Vento, depending on which framework offers the most useful organizing structure.
- ☐ **Consider the larger context.** Ask questions about how current SEA and LEA policies, procedures, and practices might support or burden the trends observed during the review.
- ☐ **Determine areas for improvement.** Based on the results of a comprehensive review, SEAs and LEAs identify areas for improvement.
- ☐ **Adapt state plans.** Results of the comprehensive review inform existing state plans. States should adopt plans to include targeted areas of focus from the review.
- ☐ **Determine necessary adjustments to structures and processes.** Based on the results of the comprehensive review of the current McKinney-Vento program implementation, consider any changes to structures and processes that may be needed to support improvements to the plan.
- ☐ **Make adjustments to structures and processes.** Make necessary adjustments to corresponding structures and processes for supporting state plans for program improvement efforts. Adjustments may include communication modes and processes, meeting times and structures, professional development structures, program-monitoring processes, and community-partner engagement procedures.
- ☐ **Consider barriers to implementing new processes.** Inform all stakeholders about the review outcomes and the agreed-upon areas of focus. Together, anticipate potential barriers to more fully implementing the McKinney-Vento program. Engage leadership early on in problem-solving related to these potential challenges.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

SEAs and LEAs may use the following reflection questions to guide their review of the current state of student homelessness and McKinney-Vento program implementation. They may also use more formal assessment tools as part of the review process (see sample resources in this section).

Data collection

- What data do we currently collect on student homelessness?
- What are the trends in the data (e.g., for all students who are homeless and for particular subgroups)?
- What are the gaps in our current data collection as it relates to the prevalence and demographics of students who are homeless? What don't we understand?
- What are additional data needed to understand student homelessness and our response better?
- What data do we currently collect regarding implementing our state plan and the quality of McKinney-Vento programming?
- Where are the gaps in our knowledge of current successes and challenges related to McKinney-Vento implementation?

Implementation of McKinney-Vento provisions

- What are our biggest challenges related to implementing McKinney-Vento provisions?
- What are the unique challenges and concerns for particular subgroups of McKinney-Vento students?
- Do we have everyone we need at the table to address student homelessness?
- For stakeholders who should be at the table, do they understand the work and their roles? What are the barriers to involvement?
- What is their shared understanding about desired outcomes?

- Do McKinney-Vento staff (coordinators and liaisons) have what they need (e.g., time, resources, capacity) to implement McKinney-Vento provisions?

Partnership and collaboration

- Who are the key internal partners needed to ensure effective implementation of our McKinney-Vento program?
- What is the current level of collaboration with internal partners?
- Who are the key external partners needed to ensure effective implementation of our McKinney-Vento program?
- What is the current level of collaboration with external partners?
- Where are there gaps in our current partnerships?
- Who is missing from the table? Why are they not at the table?

Communication and quality assurance

- What communication structures and feedback loops are in place to support the implementation of our McKinney-Vento program? (Consider structures at all levels—between the state coordinator and local liaisons; between local liaisons and district staff; between local liaisons and school staff; among SEAs, LEAs, and community partners; among coordinators, liaisons, data technicians, and SEA data staff.)
- What aspects of communication and feedback may need improvement? (Again, consider necessary improvements at all levels of the system.)
- What quality assurance structures do we have in place to support continuous assessment of fidelity to McKinney-Vento provisions?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[Needs Assessments](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[Monitoring and Program Evaluation](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program: Guide to Developing an Annual Plan for State-Level Activities](#), National Center for Homeless Education

PHASE ONE: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

District and school staff awareness and understanding

- How aware are district and school administrators and staff of the prevalence, experiences, and diverse needs of students who are homeless?
- How aware are district and school administrators and staff of the McKinney-Vento provisions?
- How do administrators demonstrate their commitment to ensuring educational equity for students who are homeless?
- Where are the gaps in staff awareness and understanding of the issues and needs of McKinney-Vento students, and what is the commitment to meeting those needs?

Alignment with other efforts

- How have districts and schools aligned McKinney-Vento with other equity-related efforts?
- How have districts and schools aligned McKinney-Vento provisions and implementation with school climate, culture commitments, and practices?
- What would enhance implementation when aligning and embedding McKinney-Vento efforts into existing structures and processes at district and school levels?

SPOTLIGHT ON COLLABORATION PRACTICES

Collaborating with community-based organizations and other public entities is not a new strategy, but it is critical for ensuring that students (and often their families) who are experiencing homelessness have access to coordinated and comprehensive services and supports. Schools and districts should have clear relationships with service-providing entities to create safe and supportive school environments. The following are some guiding concepts for those relationships:

- All perspectives matter.
- Assumptions and values should be explicit.
- Inclusion is complex and not always easy to implement.
- Broadened definitions of knowledge and data are necessary.
- Community is complex and diverse.

Coordinated services require intentional collaboration. Such an approach offers strategy and direction for mutual and ongoing alignment and coordination. We recommend adopting a coordinated approach guided by the following actions:

- ☐ Map the school community to understand the service and support entities. Consider starting by convening current partners and parallel systems of support (e.g., public health, transportation, health).
- ☐ Convene partners and communicate the purpose and focus of the collaboration.

- Introduce the ways the collaboration partners hope to work together.
 - Outline each component and the anticipated milestone for each component.
 - Indicate partnership roles in realizing the agenda.
 - Share expectations and benefits of collaboration.
 - Gather, report out, and discuss perspectives.
- Collaborate to adopt decision-making protocols.
 - Consider various options in order to include all perspectives (e.g., modified consensus, ranking, charting).
 - Develop culturally sensitive communication practices.
 - Create inclusive terminology.
- Adopt guiding rules for engagement (e.g., listen for understanding; critique ideas, not people; articulate hidden assumptions).
 - Post rules at each meeting.
- Develop a common agenda for change, which will require that partners collect and review data related to students experiencing homelessness in and around the school. Consider the following steps:
 - Collect the data from all sources (e.g., focus groups, interviews, listening sessions, community forums) that help the group understand community concerns and needs.
 - Select data and sources to tell the story (consider using storytelling as a way to share data, bring the data to life, and make the data more accessible).
 - Conduct a root cause analysis for selected topics and themes.
 - Focus on the root cause and systemic factors that affect community concerns.
 - List themes and prioritize key findings.
 - Align findings to individual and organizational behaviors and activities.
 - Identify and prioritize findings from each data source (representing a broad community perspective).
- Establish common goals and objectives for addressing the needs of students who are homeless. The collaboration should address the following questions:
 - What are the goals and objectives of the collaboration?
 - What are the strategic targets for collective action?
 - What would success look like? How will this agenda change community members, students, families, schools, and local agencies?
 - How will the community know if the intervention(s) is successful?
 - What will change, and by how much?
- Determine mutually reinforcing activities to support students experiencing homelessness. The collaboration should address the following question from each entity's perspective: How will we leverage our resources to support the desired change? The collective impact approach to change encourages individuals and organizations to use their unique perspectives and assets to contribute to a change strategy.

Adapted from Osher, Moroney, & Williamson, 2018

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[**Participatory Asset Mapping: A Community Research Lab Toolkit**](#), Advancement Project

[**Community Engagement Toolkit**](#), Collective Impact Forum

Phase Two: Implement

Adopt, monitor, and refine

States, districts, and local liaisons implement various strategies to ensure equitable access to education for students experiencing homelessness. In this section, we provide examples of best practices and resources across six domains: (1) Educate School Personnel; (2) Enhance Identification; (3) Ensure Access to Services; (4) Foster Collaborative Relationships With Students and Families; (5) Enact Supportive Policies and Procedures; and (6) Promote Safe and Supportive School Environments.

For each domain, we include practices that align with McKinney-Vento provisions and apply to all students, as well as reflection questions related to addressing diverse needs among students experiencing homelessness. Many of the strategies associated with these domains are interrelated, and practices implemented in one domain often naturally support efforts in other domains. Additionally, many districts and schools are starting to adopt universal approaches, such as trauma sensitivity and restorative practices, that support all students but are particularly important for students exposed to adversity and trauma and at greater risk for challenges that could be overlooked, misunderstood, or mishandled in school settings.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As SEAs and LEAs implement their McKinney-Vento program, regularly returning to the following broad reflection questions may be helpful:

1. What practices in each domain are we currently implementing to ensure support for students experiencing homelessness?
2. Which practices in each domain are most effective for identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness?
3. What practices or strategies identified in each domain are missing from our programming and should be considered?

Domain 1: Educate school personnel

Critical to identifying and supporting students and families experiencing homelessness is ensuring all school personnel, including local liaisons for homeless education, are trained to be respectful, compassionate, and informed in their interactions (NCHE, 2017c). In most states, SEAs are responsible for providing training and support to district liaisons, and, in turn, liaisons are responsible for educating school staff.

KEY PRACTICES

The following professional development topics are vital for school personnel. Mark the topics currently being addressed and identify ones to introduce or address more fully:

- ☐ Prevalence of student homelessness in districts and schools
- ☐ Prevalence of student homelessness related to factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation
- ☐ Causes and consequences of homelessness and related adversities for different groups of students (e.g., LGBTQIA+ youth, youth of color, unaccompanied youth)
- ☐ Needs of students experiencing homelessness and those have been exposed to trauma
- ☐ Signs of student homelessness
- ☐ Strategies for identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness
- ☐ McKinney-Vento and related requirements for serving students who are experiencing homelessness
- ☐ Barriers to accessing McKinney-Vento services
- ☐ Trauma-informed approaches to working with students and families experiencing homelessness

KEY PRACTICES CONTINUED

- ☐ Universal strategies for fostering safe and supportive school environments where all students get what they need to succeed academically (e.g., consider how to address implicit bias and focus on intentional language use)
- ☐ Strategies for talking with students and families about homelessness

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does our training for school personnel address the diverse layers of trauma for students who are experiencing homelessness (e.g., intersections between historical trauma, racial trauma, community violence, economic distress and deprivation, and family adversity)?
2. How do we support staff in tailoring their approach to supporting subgroups of students who are experiencing homelessness?
3. How do we address biases that may interfere with identifying and serving students who are experiencing homelessness?
4. How do we address biases that may interfere with providing students with services?
5. What are the barriers to training for school personnel related to student homelessness?
6. How can training on homelessness be aligned or integrated with other professional development activities to overcome barriers, raise awareness, and increase buy-in to address student homelessness?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#), 2020 Edition, National Center for Homeless Education

[ESSA – Training and Professional Development Resources](#), National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

[ESSA, Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment \(SSAE\) Program](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

[Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#) (slides and recording), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

[Building a Culture of Hope: Exploring Implicit Biases Against Poverty](#), National Youth At-Risk Journal

[Family Homelessness](#), Sesame Street in Communities

[5 Ways to Boost Parental Involvement at Low-Income Schools](#), Scientific Learning



Domain 2: Enhance identification

Although critical, identifying students in homeless situations and determining their eligibility under McKinney-Vento can be extremely challenging. Students and families may be embarrassed to reveal their homeless status to school staff, fear being stigmatized or reported to other public agencies, or have had negative experiences with public systems, including schools. In some cases, students and families living situations are constantly in flux or doubled up. Other groups, such as unaccompanied youth, are often reluctant to disclose being homeless and navigate their living situations and education on their own (Ausikaitis et al., 2015).

KEY PRACTICES

The following practices are particularly important for identifying students in homeless situations. Mark the practices currently being implemented and identify practices to introduce or more fully adopt.

- ☐ Provide ongoing training on identifying students experiencing homelessness for all school staff and key members of the community.
- ☐ Consider key staff who can identify students experiencing homelessness, such as nurses, front office staff, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, teachers, and truancy and attendance officers.
- ☐ Identify and discuss barriers to Identification of students with school administrators, including issues of school buy-in, to make Identification a priority.
- ☐ Post information about homelessness on websites and places visible to students in the school, and include information in student handbooks and school forms.
- ☐ Post information about homelessness and education-related rights in places where youth congregate, such as parks, campgrounds, libraries, and youth clubs.
- ☐ Include a housing questionnaire and related rights in enrollment and registration packets for all students.
- ☐ Build relationships with community-based agencies that serve youth experiencing homelessness to support identification (e.g., homeless shelters and transitional living sites, youth organizations, community centers, homeless coalitions, health clinics, motels).
- ☐ Collaborate with individuals responsible for implementing other federally mandated education and programs, such as Title I, Part A, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to see which students eligible for other programs may qualify as homeless.
- ☐ Participate in attendance reviews to determine whether homelessness is a factor, and educate attendance officers on ways to identify students who experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Keep a list of local shelter and motel addresses for students and families who are experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Build inquiries about living situations into forms related to enrollment and withdrawal.
- ☐ Consider language and potential barriers associated with labeling students as “homeless.” Examples of person-first language include “students experiencing homelessness,” “students in homeless situations,” “students in transition,” or “students eligible for McKinney-Vento services.”
- ☐ Engage youth experiencing homelessness as experts in determining the best ways to educate the school community about homelessness and how to foster an accepting culture.
- ☐ Incorporate homelessness and related topics into the school curriculum and school community discussions about inclusion.



SAMPLE RESOURCES

[The McKinney-Vento Act as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015](#), National

Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

[Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#), 2020 Edition, National Center for Homeless Education

[Identifying Children and Youth in Homeless Situations](#), National Center for Homeless Education

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How might a particular community's experiences of systems such as education and behavioral health hinder the identification of students experiencing homelessness?
2. What are the risks associated with identifying as homeless for particular groups of students and families?
3. How can our districts and schools work to mitigate risks that might hinder identification and access to McKinney-Vento services?
4. What are the school-level barriers to student identification (e.g., issues of knowledge, buy-in)?
5. How are we building administrator and staff buy-in to focus on identifying students who are experiencing homelessness?
6. How are we engaging youth experiencing homelessness as experts to inform our identification and engagement efforts?

Domain 3: Ensure access to services

McKinney-Vento requires that students experiencing homelessness be immediately enrolled in school regardless of whether they have the necessary documentation. While in school, students experiencing homelessness should have full access to all academic and extracurricular activities, and schools are required to minimize barriers preventing youth from receiving appropriate credit for coursework in a previous school. To ensure equal access to education and support services for McKinney-Vento students, identify and promote needed services, and be aware of current school and district policies that might produce unintended barriers to access.

KEY PRACTICES

The following practices are particularly important for enrolling and serving students experiencing homelessness. Mark the practices currently being implemented and identify practices to introduce or more fully adopt.

- ☐ Enroll students experiencing homelessness immediately.
- ☐ Keep students in the school of origin when possible and ensure students receive full credit for coursework.
- ☐ Ensure adequate transportation as specified by the law.
- ☐ Address any immediate safety issues.
- ☐ Orient parents and students to the school and staff.
- ☐ Protect privacy and confidential information.
- ☐ Contact the previous school immediately for any information that can help with enrollment.
- ☐ Gather information from parents and youth about school performance, experiences, and any paperwork they may have.
- ☐ Seek alternative ways to access key documents such as birth certificates (e.g., online services to obtain records).
- ☐ Develop community collaborations and refer students for services important for enrollment (e.g., health care, including health insurance and examinations).
- ☐ Use a brief, valid assessment of academic placement needs. ([Click here for examples](#) from the National Center for Homeless Education.)

DOMAIN THREE: KEY PRACTICES

- ☐ Ensure that unaccompanied youth have information about all education and related opportunities.
- ☐ Ensure that students experiencing homelessness have the same opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities as their peers and educate adults providing these activities about homelessness.
- ☐ Provide support to ensure consistent attendance (e.g., access to basic needs such as food, quiet study spaces, extracurricular activities of interest, and additional support from teachers and administrators to help students earn credits).
- ☐ Ensure access to alternative community-based programs related to employment training, earning college credits, and mentoring.
- ☐ Maintain connections with community-based agencies providing related services (e.g., housing, behavioral health services, trauma-specific services).
- ☐ Identify resources to help pay for equipment and fees for various activities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the unique barriers to accessing services for particular groups of students?
2. What policies related to school choice (e.g., school screening, eligibility requirements) may influence eligibility for McKinney-Vento services?
3. How do various racial and cultural communities' historical and current experiences with particular service systems affect engagement and participation in services?
4. How do we consider racial and cultural factors when connecting students to services?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[**Prompt and Proper Placement: Enrolling Students Without Records**](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[**Enrolling Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in School**](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[**Ensuring Full Participation in Extracurricular Activities for Students Experiencing Homelessness**](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[**Maximizing Credit Accrual and High School Completion for Homeless Students**](#), Best Practices in Homeless Education Brief Series, National Center for Homeless Education

[**Best Practices for Ensuring Homeless Student Access to School, Afterschool, and Summer Nutrition Programs**](#), Food Research & Action Center

Domain 4: Foster collaborative relationships with students and families

Students and families experiencing homelessness often face overwhelming stressors on a daily basis. Traumatic experiences associated with homelessness include the loss of belongings, separation from loved ones, difficulty getting basic needs met, and the stress associated with living on the streets, in vehicles, with other friends or relatives, or in a shelter. Exposure to this level of adversity can significantly interfere with a student or family's ability to trust others and form relationships.

Fostering a collaborative relationship with students and their families is critical. McKinney-Vento liaisons and other school personnel can apply strategies that empower students and families to speak respectfully, understand what is happening and can give opinions, identify potential trauma-related triggers, and make decisions related to student needs and plans.

KEY PRACTICES

The following practices are particularly important for collaborating with students and families experiencing homelessness. Mark the practices currently being implemented and identify practices to introduce or more fully adopt.

- ☐ Educate parents, guardians, and youth about their rights under McKinney-Vento.
- ☐ Treat parents, guardians, and youth with respect in all verbal and written communications.
- ☐ Use a trauma-informed approach when working with students and families.
- ☐ Identify and reduce potential triggers or trauma reminders for parents, guardians, and youth that may arise throughout the process of receiving McKinney-Vento services. .
- ☐ Anticipate potential challenges (e.g., transportation difficulties, paperwork issues) with students and families ahead of time.
- ☐ Be flexible (e.g., accommodating parent schedules or transportation issues) when navigating this journey with families.

RECOGNIZING AND REDUCING TRAUMA-RELATED TRIGGERS

Given the high trauma exposure rates, McKinney-Vento liaisons should be aware of potential trauma triggers for students and parents or caregivers when identifying, enrolling, and supporting students.

Trauma Reminders and Triggers: Reminders of past traumatic experiences cause the body to react as if the traumatic event is happening again at the moment. Reminders may include sights, sounds, feelings, or situations that remind students and parents or caregivers of previous traumatic experiences, such as:

- Loud, chaotic environments
- Uncertainty about expectations
- Unexpected changes or difficulties
- Situations involving authority figures
- Being in a school building
- Completing paperwork that asks for personal information
- Feeling disrespected by school staff
- Lack of control over decision-making
- Being publicly identified as needing assistance
- Fear of other system involvement
- Situations that provoke feelings of shame, embarrassment, or helplessness

DOMAIN FOUR: KEY PRACTICES

- ☐ Offer choices for how the material is conveyed and the pace of discussions.
- ☐ Minimize the use of acronyms and other terms that may be confusing to parents and students.
- ☐ Consider cultural factors when engaging students and their parents or caregivers, such as how to greet families; knowing what topics may be difficult to address; knowledge about a family's cultural norms, values, spiritual practices, or beliefs; and a particular group's experiences with systems, including education.

Dispute resolution

Disputes between parents, guardians, or unaccompanied youth and schools most commonly arise over McKinney-Vento eligibility issues such as whether a student should remain in the school of origin or enroll in a new school if the living situation changes, the immediacy of enrollment and participation in school activities, and transportation to and from school and activities.

No matter the dispute, ESSA guidelines call for the prompt resolution of disputes regarding the educational placement of children and youth eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Liaisons are required to ensure that parents, guardians, and youth know their right to dispute decisions and steps to take if a formal dispute process is necessary.

- Liaisons ensure that the school or district is familiar with and is in compliance with McKinney-Vento to help to prevent disputes.
- Liaisons are clear with parents, guardians, and students about what is and is not covered under the law.
- Schools provide parents, guardians, and youth with contact information for the local liaison, complete information about the dispute process, and assistance accessing support such as advocates or attorneys. Schools also ensure that the process is manageable and flexible with minimal inconvenience for parents, guardians, or youth.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the potential trauma reminders for particular groups of students who are experiencing homelessness (e.g., LGBTQIA+ students, students of color)?
2. Are there patterns of disparity in level of engagement with particular McKinney-Vento students and families (e.g., meeting attendance, disputes)?
3. How do we consider cultural factors when engaging students and families?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[McKinney-Vento Law Into Practice Dispute Resolution brief](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[Homeless Liaison Toolkit, 2020 Edition](#), National Center for Homeless Education

[Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

[Family Engagement: Resource Roundup](#), Edutopia

[Family Engagement](#), Professional development resource page, Learning for Justice

Domain 5: Enact supportive policies and procedures

A key component of McKinney-Vento involves policies that support equal access to education for students experiencing homelessness. Schools should consider putting in place or strengthening specific policies related to core aspects of the law, such as enrollment, dispute resolution, and access to services. For example, states should make their dispute resolution policy available to all LEAs and ensure adequate training on the policy. SEAs and LEAs should review all completed disputes to determine whether revisions to the policy are needed (NCHE, 2015; NCHE, 2017b).

KEY PRACTICES

The following practices are particularly important for creating policies that support students experiencing homelessness. Mark the practices currently being implemented and identify practices to introduce or more fully adopt.

- ☐ Policies are in place in the district for supporting McKinney-Vento provisions (e.g., dispute policies, transportation policies, enrollment policies).
- ☐ Clear channels exist for communicating policy documents.
- ☐ Key staff receives training on policies.
- ☐ Processes are in place for monitoring the consistent implementation of policies.
- ☐ District policies are reviewed regularly to understand the extent to which they support or hinder identification, enrollment, attendance, and overall success.
- ☐ Policy reviews include district and school administrators and liaisons and include feedback from McKinney-Vento students and their families.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Are there disparities in how policies are enforced for students experiencing homelessness?
2. Are policies in place that disproportionately affect particular groups of students experiencing homelessness?
3. What additional policies are needed to ensure equity for all students experiencing homelessness?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#), 2020 Edition, National Center for Homeless Education

[Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments



Domain 6: Promote safe and supportive school environments

Safe and supportive school environments are important for all students, and they are particularly critical for students disproportionately impacted by adversity and trauma. Children and youth who have experienced trauma, including students who are currently experiencing homelessness, often live in a state of heightened alert that makes learning difficult. For students to bounce back and heal from trauma, they must feel safe and supported, especially in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. Key practices to create a safe and supportive environment for students exposed to trauma include ways to (1) establish physical safety, (2) support emotional safety, (3) recognize and reduce trauma-related triggers, and (4) prevent and manage crises.

KEY PRACTICES

The following practices are particularly important for creating safe and supportive environments. Mark the practices currently being implemented and identify practices to introduce or more fully adopt.

- ☐ Be responsive, calm, and respectful in interactions with students and families.
- ☐ Be mindful of the stigma associated with homelessness when considering when and how to talk to a student about their living situation and related challenges (e.g., addressing reasons for a student not completing homework, asking for the student's address, mentioning the student's situation in front of other students).
- ☐ Ensure adults in the school actively address all instances of potentially traumatic experiences such as bullying, bias, exclusion, or disrespect, including targeting a student for being in a homeless situation.
- ☐ Ensure discipline practices are safe and respectful and consider the potential extenuating circumstances.
- ☐ Ensure students experiencing homelessness have the same opportunities to participate in the school community and voice their opinions.
- ☐ Maintain student privacy and confidentiality related to the students' living circumstances.

- ☐ Ensure school staff is aware of potential trauma reminders or retraumatizing practices for students experiencing homelessness and their families. Work to eliminate these practices (e.g., privacy violations, situations that cause shame or embarrassment).
- ☐ Train staff to be aware of their assumptions and biases about student behavior and life situations and be mindful of their reactions.
- ☐ Train schools in trauma-sensitive practices.
- ☐ Train schools in restorative practices.
- ☐ Train schools in cultural and gender-responsive practices.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do schools provide equitable access to a safe and supportive school environment for all students, including students who are experiencing homelessness and various subpopulations of McKinney-Vento students?
2. How do issues associated with disproportionality in academic achievement and discipline practices affect McKinney-Vento students?
3. What more can schools do to ensure a safe and supportive school environment for students experiencing homelessness?

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

[Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#), 2020 Edition, National Center for Homeless Education

Phase Three: Sustain

Evaluate, adjust, and embed

Once plans have been established and new practices implemented, LEAs and liaisons look to sustain and build upon these efforts to support an equitable environment for students experiencing homelessness. This work includes embedding key practices into school operations to ensure sustainability and determining how to take this equity work to the next level. Sustaining these efforts requires cycling through phases to explore changing needs and demographics of McKinney-Vento students, installing or strengthening structures for supporting students, and adopting new practices to meet the community's needs.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As SEAs and LEAs learn from implementing their McKinney-Vento program and consider how to identify and sustain best practices, they may find the following reflection questions useful:

1. What is or is not working related to our homeless education program plan?
2. What needs to be adjusted or modified?
3. What is missing that should be considered?
4. How do we sustain new practices?
5. How do we continue to adjust this approach as needed?
6. How do we educate others about our lessons learned and findings?
7. What else can we do to support an equitable approach to serving students who experience homelessness within our schools and districts?

KEY PRACTICES

- ☐ Evaluate the impact of efforts to support students experiencing homelessness.
- ☐ Respond to changing needs.
- ☐ Embed practices into school structures to avoid inconsistent responses by school or staff members.
- ☐ Review and update plans.
- ☐ Build communities of practice across districts or the state.

SAMPLE RESOURCES

[Monitoring and Program Evaluation resource page](#), National Center for Homeless Education



Creating inclusive environments for McKinney-Vento students requires a coordinated effort across states, districts, schools, and communities to ensure equitable access to education for youth and families experiencing homelessness. Students and families experiencing homelessness are under significant stress, and the approaches to serving them included in this publication will be most effective if provided with care and compassion. Many resources are available to state coordinators and local liaisons for homeless education as they develop, implement, and sustain plans for ensuring inclusive educational services. This guide offers a framework to direct those efforts and the deployment of services.

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